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ABSTRACT

The Refugee Education and Employment Program (REEP) of Arlington, Virginia, was designated in 1983 as one of seven sites for participation in a national Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) project of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. The primary project goal was to link overseas refugee camp training to refugee programs in the United States to facilitate refugees' English language learning and transition to employment and independence in the United States. REEP was selected to field test and refine three products and components of the project, including: (1) field testing of three versions of the Basic English Skills Tests (BEST) designed to measure general language ability; (2) testing and refinement of standardized Student Performance Levels, general descriptions by level of students' language ability; and (3) elaboration and specification of a set of curriculum guidelines entitled the "CORE Curriculum Guide," to be used as a reference guide for the development of U. S. based curricula. REEP benefitted from these tasks in the improvement of its methods and in the testing and achievement of its own goals of promoting refugee self-confidence, employment, and independence in the United States. (MSE)

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THE MAINSTREAM ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRAINING PROJECT

by Tim Riney
Arlington Refugee Education and Employment Program
Arlington VA.
1984

In late 1983 the Office of Refugee Resettlement awarded a grant to the Refugee Education and Employment Program of Arlington to be one of seven sites nationwide to participate in its Mainstream English Language Training Project. The primary goal of the project was to link overseas camp training to refugee programs in the U.S. in a way that would facilitate the refugees' English language learning and transition to employment and independence in the U.S.

This paper will (1) briefly review the MELT project and REEP's participation in it; (2) preview and interpret, from REEP's perspective, the three major outcomes of MELT (the BEST Tests, the Student Performance Levels, and the CORE Curriculum Guide); and (3) point out some of the influence and implications the project has had for REEP and might have for other refugee programs.

INTRODUCTION

In late 1983 the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) funded the Refugee Education and Employment Program (REEP) to be one of seven sites nationwide to participate in a national demonstration project called the Mainstream English Language Training (MELT) project.[1] The award of a grant to REEP was in part based on the fact that REEP had already developed and was already using its own competency-based ESL curriculum (Mansoor and Van Duzer 1982). As stated in the Federal Register, the overall goal of the MELT project was "to identify, examine, and document certain criteria as they relate to the linkage of overseas ESL training and domestic

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[1] The other MELT sites were San Francisco Community College District, San Diego Community College District, Spring Institute of International Studies of Denver, Northwest Educational Cooperative of Illinois, Project Persona of Providence, International Institute of Boston. RMC Research of New Hampshire, the American Council for Nationalities Service of New York, and the Center for Applied Linguistics of Washington, D.C., were involved in the project's coordination, data collection, and training.

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ELT programs. These are criteria pertaining to assessment and testing, student performance levels, and ELT curriculum design" (Federal Register 1983). REEP interpreted this goal to mean linking refugee programs in the U.S. to overseas camp training in a way that will facilitate the refugees' learning of English and transition to employment and independence in the U.S., and to provide means for documenting this process.

The MELT Project was designed to address the special needs of a new ESL population, refugees, who first started entering the U.S. in large numbers in 1975. This new population is quite different from those student populations which most existing ESL programs in the U.S. have been designed for. First of all, a significant number of refugees in ELT programs are middle-aged or older and are semi- or non-literate in their own language. In addition, many come from traditional and rural backgrounds very different from urban North American culture. Many arrive in our program in a state of disorientation because of the abrupt changes they have been through and are still going through. Furthermore, in addition to having the above characteristics, none of which favors second language learning, the refugees are expected to learn English quickly and sufficiently well in order to become employed and independent taxpayers.

The MELT project was planned in three phases which involved identifying what products needed to be developed, developing them, and field testing them. Phase I brought together experienced ESL practioners from both the U.S. and the refugee camps overseas for the purpose of consultation and development of curriculum guidelines and performance level descriptions. Phase II developed three new field-test versions of the BEST Test. Phase III involved the selection and funding of programs as "national demonstration sites" to help complete, field test, refine, and validate these new products. Because MELT was intended to be national in scope and broad in relevance, the sites which were selected varied in size, background, resources, expertise, and approach.

REEP was one of the sites selected to be involved in Phase III, the field testing and refining of the three products and components of the project, shown in Figure 1. This phase involved the field testing of three versions of the "BEST Tests" (Basic English Skills Tests), designed to measure students' general language ability. Secondly, Phase II involved the testing and refinement of standardized "Student Performance Levels" (SPIs), which would be general descriptions, by level, of students' language ability. Thirdly, Phase III involved elaborating and specifying a set of curriculum guidelines, the "CORE Curriculum Guide", which would serve as a reference guide for the development of U.S. based curricula.

OVERVIEW

Before describing MELT's three components in more detail, and REEP's participation in the field testing of them, I would first like to present a plan and overview of the project and explain how it components might be useful to refugee programs in the U.S.[2] In this overview, I will use our site, REEP, as the example MELT site. REEP developed the plan shown in Figure 1 in December of last year when REEP first began the project. The assumptions behind this overview helped guide REEP's input into the project throughout much of the year, as we worked on testing and refining each of MELT's three components simultaneously.

As shown in Figure 1, refugee ESL students entering the U.S. from the camps would first be given one of the three versions of the BEST Test. The students' scores on this test would serve as an indicator of their student performance level (SPL). REEP would then use incoming BEST Test scores and SPLs as the two principal criteria for placing a student into a REEP instructional level.

As we continue to follow Figure 1, we see that REEP has two tracks of instruction, "A" and "B". Track A would serve those students with fewer than six years of previous formal education in any language (and those who tend to be slower learners and in need of a more basic curriculum and instruction). Track B would serve those who enter REEP after having already had six or more years of education. On the basis of their previous education, students would be placed into Track A or Track B. Then, on the basis of their BEST scores and SPLs, students would be placed into one of the instructional levels within each track. Placement into REEP's instructional levels would be made on the basis of the set of correspondences between MELT's SPLs and REEP's instructional levels shown in Figure 2.

What would it mean to complete an instructional level? In accordance with the recommendations of the COBE Curriculum Guide (represented in the center of Figure 1), the REEP Curriculum would be comprised of various job and life skills, or "competencies". A student's mastery of any competency at any instructional level would be specified and measured by performance objectives which the student would be expected to master by the end of the instructional level.

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[2] I should emphasize that this is merely one interpretation by REEP of how the MELT Project might work for REEP, and it does not necessarily reflect the views of the other MELT sites or OBE.

Certain of these performance objectives would be prioritized as "key" performance objectives. These would be considered the most essential lifeskills for the purpose of evaluation of the students' completion of the level and readiness to progress on to the next higher instructional level. At each successive level, the performance objectives and the knowledge and language required to master them would become more difficult and complex.

Finally, as Figure 1 illustrates, when the students finish their instruction at REEP, they would be given a different (but equivalent) version of the BEST Test, this time to determine their SPL <u>after</u> instruction. This second performance level would serve as an indicator as to whether the students had made progress in the program, how much that progress had been (and over how many hours), and what the students' job readiness would be in terms of general language ability.

THE BEST TEST AND THE STUDENT PERFORMANCE LEVELS

Of the three components of MELT, the BEST Test, developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, was the most finished product when Phase III began. A refinement of its 1982 BEST predecessor, the 1984 BEST is a competency-based ESL proficiency test which can be used for placement and diagnostic purposes. During Phase III, REEP helped field test the BEST Test, pre-testing 125 students before instruction, and post-testing 103 after instruction. At the same time, REEP, along with the other MELT sites, helped evaluate and comment on all aspects of the test, providing the Center for Applied Linguistics with valuable feedback for the purpose of test refinement.

The SPLs are descriptions of students' general language proficiency in English regardless of previous language training. In this respect SPLs are similar in purpose to FSI levels, though SPLs are designed for a different type of student population and for lower levels of second language proficiency. MELT's SPLs are comprised of ten levels, the lower six of which are descriptive of students at REEP and probably most refugee programs. In addition to describing language ability in global terms, the SPLs also describe ability by component or skill area (e.g., listening comprehension, oral comprehension, reading and writing, pronunciation)

Before field-testing the SPLs, REEP and the other sites were first trained by the Center for Applied Linguistics (using videotapes, of actual refugee ESL speakers) in identifying a given subject's SPL. While REEP (and the other MELT sites) used the SPL descriptions, and assigned

them to refugees, REEP at the same time made suggestions for revisions of the SPIs with regard to their clarity, conciseness, and consistency.

At REEP, we found the BEST Tests and the SPIs viable products which, if used, would equip sites to communicate with one another in the same terms.

THE CORE CURRICULUM GUIDE

Of the three components of the MELT project, the CORE Curriculum Guide was the least complete at the beginning of Phase III, and throughout the past year it has been the component which has demanded the greatest proportion of our time at REEP.

At the beginning of of Phase III, the CORE Guide consisted of some general curriculum considerations, an extensive list of competencies and functions by topic, an inventory of grammatical structures, and some sample curriculum formats. Because the CORE Guide was still in a incomplete form, our curriculum revision work was necessarily a two-way process. While revising its own curriculum in accordance with the recommendations of the CORE Guide, each of the seven sites was simultaneously making suggestions for how the CORE Guide itself might be revised. One problem we experienced was that we had to define our own curriculum in terms of a CORE Guide which was itself not yet completely defined. This two-way process, involving seven sites both influencing and being influenced by the CORE Guide, is illustrated in Figure 3.

Of the seven sites beginning the project, REEP was one of those which had already developed and was already using a curriculum which was similar in many respects to that which had been recommended during the first phase of the MELT project. For example, REEP's 1982 curriculum was already competency based, it already included and indexed language functions and grammatical structures, it already had a separate literacy track, and it was already organized into topics which were identified areas of student need.

Because REEP had begun the project with this 1982 curriculum, we were able to focus more of our time on refining what already existed, rather than on inventing completely new items. In addition, we were able to incorporate into our existing framework new ideas and considerations, recommended to us by the CORE Guide and the other sites. In response to the recommendations of CORE, for example, we shifted our curriculum more toward developing refugee employment and independence. Also, in response to the recommendations of CORE, we have introduced a cross-cultural component, a materials and techniques component, and a reading and writing component.

Furthermore, though our discussions with the other MELT sites about the project, we were stimulated to research and consider more carefully the definitions and roles which competencies, performance objectives, language functions, and grammatical structures should have in our curriculum and in our classroom instruction. Finally, in response to OBE's request that we provide a means for measurement and documentation of student progress (Federal Report 1983), we developed more specific performance objectives and more refined achievement plans for measurement and documentation of our students' performance.

In general, our continual work on field testing and revising the COBE Guide enlightened and facilitated the revisions of our own curriculum. We may summarize BEEP's revision of MELT's competencies to illustrate this. One of our tasks as a MELT site was to evaluate all the competencies in the COBE Guide. To facilitate this MELT task we developed the procedure represented in a flow chart form in Figure 4. After completing our MELT task, we were able to turn around and use the same procedure for the refinement of our own curriculum. As shown in Figure 4, we first evaluated and rated a competency in terms of its content validity, i.e., its survival importance for our students. Then we judged the appropriateness of its placement into the topic and level to which it was assigned. Finally, we judged its form, including its clarity, conciseness, and consistency of expression.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, BEEP's most valuable reward from participating in this project was our own education. Throughout the past year, while we were constantly faced with deadlines and deliverables, we were given a considerable amount of freedom to express and develop our own ideas. Throughout our work, we aimed at our original MELT goals of promoting refugee achievement of self-confidence, employment, and independence in the U.S., and providing standardized and reliable means for documenting that achievement.

How well MELT will succeed nationwide will depend on how well refugee programs throughout the country recognize the importance of MELT's goals and the potential of MELT's three products. MELT's valid aim for all of us, whether we be in San Francisco or Kansas City or Arlington, is that we, as ESL professionals, all speak the same language so that we will all understand each other and work together better.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a revised version of a presentation I did with Peggy Seufert-Bosco, REEP's MELT Testing Coordinator, at the 1984 WATESOL Conference. I am especially grateful to Inaam Manscor, REEP's MELT Project Director, for her many helpful comments on this paper.

THE AUTHOR

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Manscor, Inaam and Carol Van Duzer. 1982. The REEP Curriculum. Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA.

FIGURE 1

PHASE THREE : Test, Refine, Validate BEST, PLs, CORE

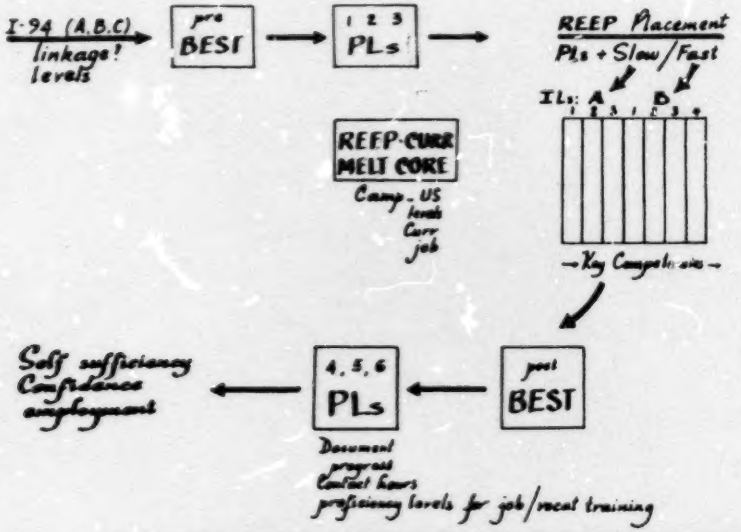
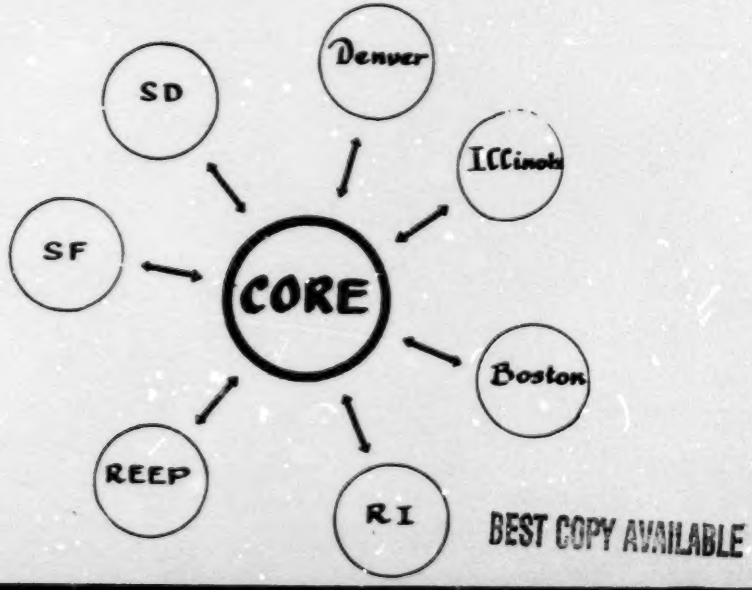


FIGURE 2

Completion of REEP Instructional Levels	equals	MELT Student Performance Levels
		0, 1-
Literacy		1-, 1
A-1	mid B-1	2
A-2	B-1	3
A-3	B-2	4
	B-3	5
	B-4	6

FIGURE 3



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FIGURE 4

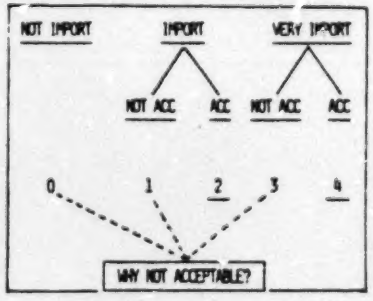
STEPS FOR EVALUATING AND IMPROVING COMPETENCIES

I. JUDGE IMPORTANCE FOR SURVIVAL

II. JUDGE ACCEPTABILITY

III. RATE COMPETENCY (FORM 1)

IV. EXPLAIN RATING 0,1,3 (FORM 2)



CONTENT?

LEVEL?
TOPIC?

FORM?
CLEAR?
CONCISE?
CONSISTENT?

V. SUGGEST REVISION FOR 1,3 (FORM 2)

WRITE YOUR IMPROVEMENT